

Immigration policy will be the test of Theresa May's "shared society"

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/immigration-policy-and-theresa-mays-shared-society/

10/01/2017

The Prime Minister has a vision for a "shared society". Yet, the Brexit vote revealed that large sections of the population have a vision for an old order. [Tony Hockley](#) writes that in this context, the government's immigration policy is critical. He sees Brexit as an opportunity to shift norms of local identity, and draws on the Conservative Party's history to suggest how the PM could sell such a change to her party.



Theresa May has recently set out her vision for a "shared society", in a plan to demonstrate that "mainstream, centre ground politics" can deliver the real change that those who voted to leave the European Union might wish to see. This is familiar rhetoric for the post-Thatcher Conservative Party. But this time the stakes are much higher, as the UK system of governance is being tested, not just the routine electoral fortunes of the two main parties. The Brexit vote demonstrated the strain that the old two-party system is suffering, and so a more active social policy cannot be allowed to drift into becoming the same old Conservative paternalism, based more on control than on self-determination.

Active social policy is not a misguided strategy for the Conservatives. John Major's call for a "classless society" earned him in excess of 14 million votes in 1992: more than any party [has won before or since](#). The problem is matching reality to the rhetoric. Major's "Citizens Charter" served to reinforce the interests and powers of the middle classes, giving too much choice and control over services to those who already had the loudest voices within the system. His "back to basics" mantra reinforced the impression that this was about the restoration of old values rather an agenda for a more liberal future. In the next Conservative-led government some 13 years later, David Cameron's "Big Society" all but drowned under the pressure of fiscal austerity and the rise of immigration to the top of the many communities' concerns: forces his "big society" experiments with devolution did nothing to mitigate.

Once again, the Conservatives face the challenge of matching reality to rhetoric, whilst also striving to keep the support of their "small-c" conservative core vote. From the beginning of Cameron's leadership bid, he set out to force his party to change; to begin to adopt aspects of social liberalism to complement its longstanding commitment to economic liberalism. Ironically, it seems that he succeeded with his party but left a large section of the public behind. Analysis of the Brexit vote [has revealed](#) a widespread conservatism in the provinces and shires, harking back to an old "order", in a rosy and rather authoritarian view of the past. People in erstwhile stable communities have found themselves beset by unprecedented and rapid change, and have unsurprisingly found it challenging. Almost nothing had been done to prepare these communities for change, resulting in a feelings of lost identities.

Cameron's success in winning the Conservative Party over to support for gay marriage was a seismic shift in its ideology. By [focusing](#) on the "commitment" of marriage rather than its religious symbolism, he reinterpreted the norms of conservatism. By doing so, he gave Conservatives a sense of control over the changing social environment. They could incorporate social liberalism into their identity, rather than continue to resist it. A similar strategy is required now to give people a sense of control over immigration. After the Brexit vote, it would be impossible to build a "shared society" without this change.

The issue [appears to be](#) less one of absolute immigrant numbers, but more a natural fear of uncontrolled and uncontrollable change. If the norms of local identities need to adapt to mass migration then a degree of local control will be essential to delivering this change. Debates over the challenges and benefits of immigration must take place within affected communities. In January 2017, an All-Party Parliamentary Group [recommended](#) regional decision-making on visas, an idea that had already been [mooted](#) by the IPPR. Such a devolved approach, focused on outcomes rather than random national targets should make great sense to conservatives.

Devolution has proven less popular than governments expected perhaps because too little of what really mattered was being devolved. A devolved immigration policy would take this to a whole new level. It would also sit well with a new “[place-based](#)” industrial strategy, within which local economic potential is prioritised over one-size-fits-all policies. A strong local voice in immigration policy could go some way towards shifting norms of local identity, so that new, valued shared identities emerge, and thus rebuilding the “[we thinking](#)” in communities that would be crucial to fostering any sort of “shared society”.

Balanced discussion of immigration and integration cannot remain the preserve of a metropolitan middle class. These are people who will always enjoy significant self-determination, regardless of the rapid changing environment. A shared society is meaningless if it implies yet more middle-class state paternalism. With Brexit, a unique opportunity emerges to move beyond this. The question is whether the Prime Minister has the resolve to relinquish control and, like Cameron, sell the change to her party.

About the Author

Tony Hockley is a Visiting Senior Fellow in the Department of Social Policy at the LSE, where he teaches Behavioural Public Policy. He is Director of the Policy Analysis Centre.

